


6-22-1979

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Recommended Citation

Smolski, Chester, "Visit Radburn Where People Turn their Backs to the Automobile" (1979). *Smolski Texts*. 133.
https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski_text/133

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Visit Radburn where people turn their backs to the automobile

Chester Smolski

RADBURN, New Jersey — After 50 years it is still one of America's most visited communities, yet there is little for the tourist to see or do. It consists of only 150 acres, a small part of the municipality of Fair Lawn, with 3,000 persons living in 430 single-family houses and 196 apartments, row houses and duplexes. Except for the sizable expanses of green spaces and differently arranged houses, what is

it about Radburn, located just 10 miles west of the George Washington Bridge, that makes it such a unique community known throughout the entire world?

In 1929 Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, architects and planners, and Alexander Bing, realtor-financier, brought together, for the first time, a variety of practices on the arrangement and siting of housing units in such a way as to accommodate both the automobile and the pedestrian. This planned "town for the motor age" was never completed because the Depression came shortly after construction began. Yet this attractive and unusual housing complex, called "perhaps the most significant single notion in 20th Century urban development," is the progenitor of residential developments and new towns throughout the world today.

Driving in Radburn does not reveal the planning concepts put to use here because they are well disguised behind a verdant scenery of trees, bushes and large expanses of grass, but on foot one quickly realizes that lovely homes set on lots as small as 45 by 80 feet blend in well in this most pleasing landscape. A large central park with playgrounds, swimming pool and school serves as the focus for the inordinately large blocks on which the houses are located.

Approximately 10 times larger than a typical city block, these superblocks (only two were built) are designed to prevent cars from driving through residential areas. The only roads leading into the blocks are cul-de-sacs around which a dozen houses are situated, thus these dead end streets serve only the residents living on them.

Unusual here are the houses themselves, with their backs to the streets and their fronts facing the walkways. Somewhat confusing to the outsider who expects the fronts of the houses to face the streets, this separation of walkway from street by houses effectively separates the car from the pedestrian.

The unique physical arrangement of the houses in Radburn allows major savings in costs because the area in streets and length of utilities is reduced by 20 percent when compared with the typical housing development of today, with houses facing the streets and set on large individual lots. This is the major advantage of "clustering" houses, a feature allowed under zoning regulations but most unusual in Rhode Island.

Different as is Radburn with its design

that draws planners from throughout the world, it is also notable for the sense of community which is instilled in its residents. People are brought together because community facilities are shared (there are only two common swimming pools for this entire affluent community). It is also easier to meet people because walking is encouraged as a result of the car-pedestrian separation; thus there are more frequent people-to-people contacts rather than cars-driving-by-cars encounters. One-half of the residents walk to do their grocery shopping and 25 percent regularly use bicycles to do errands. These high figures reflect the ease with which walking and bicycling are accomplished without competition from the automobile. And families with children have a greater sense of security, with 87 percent of such families rating Radburn as an excellent community. Finally, the local Radburn Association, sponsor and provider of services to the community, works effectively to bring residents together in many and varied activities.

The contrast between Radburn and the surrounding developments is striking and must be seen to be fully appreciated, for all of the area enclosing Radburn has been developed in the traditional suburban style with individual houses set on large lots and no common open spaces or community facilities. Yet with all of its advantages, there are no Radburn style developments in Rhode Island and none is planned in the future. The explanation for this is quite simple: most citizens serving on the planning boards of our 39 municipalities have likely never heard of a Radburn nor the concepts entailed in this form of development, yet only four hours from our state is the original and only Radburn, although copies of it are found in most parts of the world.

It would be a service to this state if one member of each planning board from our cities and towns were to board a bus and share one day or a weekend in Radburn to see what was accomplished 50 years ago, and what still remains as a model for residential development the world over. Not only would these people likely be impressed but they would most certainly bring some of these concepts back to their own communities. These communities and our state would be the better for it, both in terms of a more efficient use of land for housing and in building stronger communities.

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